WORLD DOWN SYNDROME DAY

It is an honor and privilege for me to address you on this important day and to share with you my experiences, my work, my hopes and especially all my LOVE for our sons and daughters. Unfortunately, for reasons beyond my control, I cannot be with you today physically, but my heart and spirit are with you.

It all started when Eduardo, my first child, was born; however, it was not until he was six months old that I heard the sentence that would substantially change my view of the world. My small child had Down syndrome. The words still ring in my ears: "Eduardo is not, and never will be, like the other faces of reality," said the doctors, and everyone else. I was thrown into the deepest despair, beyond all compassion and tolerance. The pain was indescribable; there were no words to express it. Condemned to a tragic fate, with seemingly no future, no hope, I was determined to rise above this with Eduardo's help. I loved him with all my heart.

One day, Eduardo suddenly left, but not before opening the way to other horizons. I believe he came into the world with one clear intention: to help me to discover myself and to see the world through his eyes. He taught me to love life from a child's heart, to discover that the true meaning of life is service, which is done by feeling and constructing realities—not only service that tries to lessen the pain and suffering of others, but also the service that is committed and takes on challenges, opening spaces and giving new meaning to life from the heart.

The John Langdon Down Foundation was created in 1972, Eduardo's last year of life. Our mission is to empower people with Down syndrome by promoting their human rights and dignity so they can reach their full potential and improve their quality of life. For the past forty years, the Foundation has learned to fly like a kite in the skies as our students discovered new forms of expressing themselves to reinvent life through the color and the spirit of their creations.

More recently, the Mexican School of Down Art was established. It is a unique place, with no equivalent counterpart in the entire world. Symbolic expression has allowed our young people to turn their language deficits into shapes and colors through different materials and fine arts techniques such as oil painting, mixed media, engraving and lithography. With their brushes, these artists succeed in expressing their feelings and emotions, their dreams, their desires and frustrations, their hopes and wishes. Art undoubtedly is also a means through which they can reassert their identity and boost their self-esteem.

Our students' paintings, lithographs, and linocuts have been exhibited in recognized museums and galleries across America, Europe and Asia. Three years ago, we were honored to present the "Colors of the Wind" exhibition at the prestigious Instituto Cervantes in Tokyo, as part of the celebration of the four-hundredth anniversary of the first friendly contacts between Mexico and Japan. For me, it was a wonderful experience, and my heart remains with the Japanese people. During the art exhibition, I had the opportunity to share our school's experiences with Japanese professionals as well as parents. I deeply wish new initiatives may arise between Japan and Mexico to share the mission of supporting human development through art.

We have discovered, through art, that education opens the doors to a rich world of great accomplishments that fosters the development of all the skills of a person, including artistic skills. People with Down syndrome make us look at life more deeply. If we spend time with them and succeed in fathoming their way of looking at the world, they may help us reassess our essential values. From behind their visible shortcomings the strength of the human spirit emerges, the creative skills that go beyond the mechanisms of intelligence and permeate everything with a light that only they can give us: to enjoy life with no restrictions

Sylvia G. Escamilla